

Celebrating 25 Years *of the* **Conservation Reserve Program**

CRP — On the Ground

CREP Project
Saves Streams
Walla Walla Co.



Grass Filter Strip
Protects Peone
Creek,
Spokane Co.



CRP Creates
Wildlife Park
Spokane Co.



CRP Provides
Farm Balance
Whitman Co.



CREP Preserves
Family Lifestyle in
Whatcom Co.



Business Grows
with CRP in
Whitman Co.



Walla Walla County CREP—Photo by Chris Bieker

By Mike Denny
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CREP Project Saves Streams

In south central Walla Walla County there is a family farm that has sustained five generations of the Schulke family. This dry land wheat farm/ cattle ranch is now worked by Jeff and his dad Jim. This 3000+ acre operation has two important streams that flow through the family property. One of these streams flows from the east to the west across southern Walla Walla County and is a tributary of the Walla Walla River, known as Dry Creek which is a misnomer as the stream does not go dry. In fact it hosts a population of Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed Steelhead. Though this perennial stream is deeply incised in areas to forty feet it has proved to be a very important stream in creating outstanding riparian corridors. The second stream flows north across the farm and then dumps into Dry Creek. This second creek is named Mud Creek, one of three Mud Creeks in this county.

In 1998 the Schulke family made a very important choice and that was to

25 Years of CRP

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stop farming right to the edges of the streams on their land. They came to realize that Dry Creek had suffered considerably due to the loss of its riparian buffers over the years and that the economics of farming up against wet areas was just too costly. They decided to place four acres in the new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency under a program that would offer land retirement with compensation dependant on soil type to restore degraded shorelines to native riparian buffers. The Schulke family opted to enter this new program in order to save their streams from their cattle and erosion of silts and fecal coli forms into their creeks. This was the first step in a whole new approach to managing their land.

After the first four acres were installed by the Walla Walla County Conservation District, Jeff waited and wanted this first CREP project to be an outstanding success, so he said that he was out there practically forcing the native trees and shrubs to grow. It was not growing fast enough for him. The native grass buffers were not doing what he thought they should be doing. The invasive weeds on the other hand were doing great and seemed to be out competing everything that had been planted. After the first year and a lot of hard work to get this project off the ground Jeff was not convinced they had done the right thing.

Then that next spring, Jeff said that the native grasses took off and were outcompeting the weeds and it was then that it dawned on him that nature has its own time table and regardless of what he wanted, nature was in control. So it was that Jeff came to understand that what he had done was to graft a four acre living patch of native plants onto a patch of shoreline that was now in deep recovery. This site had been in poor condition for more than 70 years. He now understood that it had taken a long time to create the problem and that recovery would also take time. That was thirteen years ago and 261 additional acres of CREP later. Changes that have occurred are amazing due to physical growth of tens of thousands of native trees, shrubs and grasses as well as a new perspective and philosophy adopted by the Schulke family.

The Schulke family decided that the bulk of the damage had been created by unlimited access of their cattle to the stream shorelines over many years and the resulting loss of native vegetation had severely impacted the health and quality of these streams and their land. So they decided to remove cattle from their operation and concentrate on dry land wheat, grass hay and other crops. So it has been a partnership with FSA, NRCS and the Walla Walla County Conservation District that has created outstanding functioning riparian buffers. Dry Creek and Mud Creek both are shaded, fecal coliform issues are gone and erosion of soils and chemical residues into these creeks has ended. Water quality, temperature issues and water volumes have all greatly improved. Wildlife use of these 265 acres of maturing CREP is something to behold. The species that benefit are federally protected neo-tropic birds, native raptors, game birds and scores of native mammals, such as deer, moose and rabbits. The Schulkes enjoy the benefits and greatly appreciate the new view and all the additional wildlife they see.

In 2007, The Schulke family was selected as the Walla Walla County Conservation Farmers of the year by the Walla Walla County Conservation District Board of Supervisors due to Jeff's outstanding land ethic and stewardship of the natural resources on his lands. Then in October 2007, Jeff Schulke was selected as the Washington State Conservation Farmer of the Year by the Washington State Conservation Commission and Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife. The CREP acres on the Schulke Farm have been the subject of many tours and research by University and College students. Over the last thirteen years Jeff has come to appreciate this new world he has had a hand in restoring for the future.



Schulke riparian buffer—Photo courtesy of the Walla Walla Conservation Dist.